

I Timothy 1

1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope,

²To Timothy, my loyal child in the faith:

Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

Warning against False Teachers

³I urge you, as I did when I was on my way to Macedonia, to remain in Ephesus so that you may instruct certain people not to teach any different doctrine, ⁴and not to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies that promote speculations rather than the divine training^[a] that is known by faith. ⁵But the aim of such instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith. ⁶Some people have deviated from these and turned to meaningless talk, ⁷desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make assertions.

⁸Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it legitimately. ⁹This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, ¹⁰fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching ¹¹that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.

Gratitude for Mercy

¹²I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, ¹³even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, ¹⁴and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost. ¹⁶But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life. ¹⁷To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever.^[b] Amen.

¹⁸I am giving you these instructions, Timothy, my child, in accordance with the prophecies made earlier about you, so that by following them you may fight the good fight.

2 Timothy 1

Salutation

¹ Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, for the sake of the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus,

² To Timothy, my beloved child:

Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

Thanksgiving and Encouragement

³ I am grateful to God—whom I worship with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did—when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. ⁴ Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy. ⁵ I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you. ⁶ For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; ⁷ for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.

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1 Timothy 1: 1-18; 2 Timothy 2:1-7

Prayers for a Protégé

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In the circles of biblical scholarship, First and Second Timothy and Titus are called the “Pastoral Epistles.” They are called that because of certain themes presented in these letters. They claim that any teaching other than their own is “false” teaching, they advocate for respectable church behavior, and they outline the qualifications for church leaders and codes for church management. (At least that’s what my study Bible tells me in the opening paragraphs about these particular books.) As I see it then, perhaps it’s not too far afield to think of these letters collectively as the very first *Book of Order*. Rather than being spiritual or prophetic, or a reflection on Jesus’ ministry in the world, these letters happen to be practical, purposeful, and oftentimes infuriating, not unlike the Presbyterians’ way more wordy and weighty *Book of Order*, our oft disputed Constitutional manual for practice which outlines the rules and regs for our particular tribe of Christianity.

Well for today, and for the rest of September, I’m going to focus on just these 2 letters penned to Timothy. SO... when we get to the roles of Paul and Timothy in these texts, it’s also helpful to note that it may or may not be the “real” Paul and Timothy who are communicating back and forth when we delve into the history of

these letters. The point is, it's about who and what they represent that matters. Paul is the apostle, the mentor, the one who speaks with full power and authority to represent the gospel. Timothy is the one being instructed, the learner, the one who is supposed to put into practice all these grand ideas that Paul seems to think will grow and strengthen the church. It helps if we presume in our reading that it's not just a hierarchical arrangement – but a true relationship – one that has been built on love, and trust, and support, and encouragement.

These two prayerful salutations help us see it that way. Paul addresses his letters to Timothy, the loyal child, the beloved child, the one Paul trusts to see to it that the gospel continues into future generations. That's quite a responsibility – one we must continue to pass from generation to generation today. For as much as we bemoan the decline of participation in church-related activities now, at any time in given history, the message is always just a generation away from fading into obscurity. Having the Bible on a dusty old bookshelf won't do it. These stories have to infuse and inspire the next generation of believers, and the risk is always there that the medium will negatively affect the message. Paul's admonitions that doctrine must be right, and leaders in the church must be upstanding, and care for the least of these must be essential to any ministry done in the name of Christ are exactly the same concerns that get repeated time and time again. They are expressed through the practices we do the best, and they are reminders that we will also fail repeatedly to do the things we ought

to do in lovingly attempting to convey the gospel to our children or our grandchildren. In that way, Paul and Timothy aren't just ancient history, they signify the essence of what we are trying to do to help the church succeed in ministry for future generations.

Our good old authority figure, Paul, is the one who reminds us that a sense of decency and order are important for founding an institution like the church. You can't promote a religion that has no boundaries and no understanding of the truth. You can't trust a religion if its leaders are known to be awful human beings. And you can't discover God's amazing love in a religion that marginalizes people and works only toward its own status-seeking in the world. Nevertheless, Paul is quick to say that the church is made up of dirty rotten scoundrels like himself, whose only means of being healed and being set free from his past was knowing the love of God brought to him through his mystical encounter with Jesus Christ.

Next week, I'll try to address how to deal with those cringe-worthy passages where Paul, or Paul's ghost writer anyway, goes too far with such rule-making and ends up sticking us with the kind of prescriptive church junk we've had to do theological gymnastics to successfully undo even though the Bible presents a pretty darn consistent message of God's love for humankind.

But for this week, I'm giving Paul and a good number of his successors the benefit of the doubt. His shared vulnerability as an authority figure suggests that he

might be talking from a much deeper place, at least some of the time. His own writing seems to suggest that he took the binding of the law way too seriously when he was a devout and zealous Jew. In the sense that the law gives us guideposts for good behavior, maybe it can be a good thing. But he is quick to point out that it wasn't the law that saved him. Under the law, he was a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a violent, hateful human being. It was grace that saved him. The saying is sure, and worthy of full acceptance, he says, that Christ came into the world to save sinners – and of all those sinners, even the ones he lists like murderers, fornicators, liars, and slave-traders, he says, I am the foremost. Paul is excessive in describing his humility, not just for the purpose of this letter, but for the purpose of guiding Timothy and the next generation of believers to faith. Paul, the elder, the wiser, the mentor loses his ego for the sake of the gospel. Now he will wordily tell Timothy what to do in running the church, for good or for ill. That's true. But he first humbles himself and prays, deep sweet prayers for his protégé in the faith.

Turning our attention now to Timothy – we don't have the benefit of knowing what he wrote in response. That's interesting, isn't it? We know that Paul prays for him constantly, both day and night. We know that these two men have shared tears and joy, laughter and sorrow. We know that Timothy received instruction in the faith, not just from Paul but from his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice. And through the laying on of hands, Paul passes his authority, his faith, his wisdom, his

guidance and love to Timothy reminding him that God did not give him a spirit of cowardice, but instead a spirit of power and love and self-discipline.

Those other church traditions, both ones kept and ones thrown away might not be what's truly important here. Perhaps it's the relationship that we should pay attention to, the relationship that recurs as the authority of the gospel gets passed on from the elder, mentor, apostle-types to the youthful, energetic, protégé-types. I'm afraid that instead of seeing the relationship of love, humility, and encouragement that is present in these letters, that the church as an institution has focused on the power and authority it can derive from its position as the keeper of tradition. Fortunately for us, the proof of the power of the gospel happens not as the *Book of Order* gets fatter or more legalistic, or as any set of religious rules gets harsher in its enforcement. No, the power of the gospel happens between grandparents and parents and their offspring. It happens in churches that make room for all generations to give their particular gifts of wisdom or enthusiasm or compassion. It happens when congregations like this one, invite seminary students into positions of leadership in their congregations, and then trust them to grow in their skills and strengths for ministry which may or may not look exactly like the church has done it all before.

With Paul and Timothy as our guideposts, we get a picture of the holistic journey of the church, where wisdom is passed down, and new forms emerge. Jesus said much the same thing in his parable of the wineskins. If you take the new wine

and put it in old wineskins, they will burst. Fresh wine requires fresh wineskins. And the aged wine is appreciated for the deepening of its flavors. Both old traditions and new forms live side by side in the church. Throwing out either, lessens both. Learning from each other is what we do, it's who we are as we understand the living, breathing nature of the gospel. The gospel really is just another word for the message of God's love. We understand that more when we pray for each other, when we are filled with joy at seeing each other, when we share the spirit of power and promote the spirit of love. Discipline, yes, it requires that too. But love and justice must always come first. Amen.